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The 'Little' Problem (Part II)

Ephesians 2:1-5

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Several weeks ago, I ended my sermon on the little problem of our transgressions and sins by telling you I would be back to tell you why Paul's analysis of the human condition is so universally true. So here I am to tell you what St. Paul has to say to those of us who are dead in our sins. Paul's answer to the question is three-fold. There are three forces at work, he says.

The first is found in verse 2: Paul says we 'followed the ways of this world.' The age in which we live has a certain characteristic, a condition, and we are pressured by it. We are made to conform by the age in which we live. By world, Paul is referring to human society apart from God, not the physical world of lakes and mountains and farmland, but the world, secular society, trying to live apart from God, determined to work out all problems without any reference whatsoever to God. This world in which we live produces tremendous pressure to conform, to be governed by its rules.

Haven't we all felt this? This is why fashions are so powerfully influential among us. We hardly dare to be different. If we are different, we break away completely and form another society whose members are made to conform within it. When I was younger, you never saw a hippie with a crew cut. These days, almost every man I know under forty has a goatee.

But conformity isn't only in the realm of fashion, it's in the way we react, in our attitudes. We are governed by the attitudes of our associates, and we are pressured to conform by our peers around us. That's the world, and what a tremendous pressure it exerts! It rejects anybody who is noticeably different. That's why the world hates genuine Christianity. Genuine Christians belong to neither of the extremes which are always present in society. They have to contrast with both. And therefore they get attacked from both sides, if they are really where Christ stands. One of the indications of whether your Christianity is genuine or not is whether you do get attacked from both sides, because Christianity is a third way of life. So that's the first answer, that we are following the ways of this world.

Paul's second answer is that beyond the world lies something else - something sinister: 'you followed the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.' Paul is taking us back, behind the facades, behind what we call the normal activities of life. He is tearing off the veil and revealing to us what is really there. He says there is an organized realm of malevolent beings, headed by a ruler of incredible subtlety and power who is at work behind the scene to create disobedience. That's the stock in trade of the Devil - disobedience.

Paul calls him the 'ruler of the kingdom of the air,' though I don't think he means that literally in the sense of oxygen and nitrogen. His point is to say that as the air pervades our environment and yet is invisible to us, so the Devil and his angels, and all the vast realm of demonic beings arrayed against God, are surrounding us on every side invisible to us and yet constantly manipulating the human race

by means of the pressures of the world and, as we'll see later on, the flesh, affecting human minds and hearts and thoughts so that we will act disobediently.

Disobedient to what? You have to have something to obey in order to be disobedient. What is Paul referring to? It is truth. The God of truth is always trying to capture our attention and set reality before us. But there is an evil spirit in society which is constantly saying, "When you see truth, don't do it!" Take something simple, like, oh, laws against littering. It should be sufficient to point out to people that if you throw beer cans along the road you are going to destroy the beauty of the road. So well meaning public servants put up signs to remind people not to litter, and that should be enough. But it isn't, is it? People throw the cans out and hit the signs which say: DON'T LITTER. There is a disobedient spirit at work.

That's why our initial reaction to some demand is almost always, 'Why should I? Who do you think you are?' There seems to be a tinge of disobedience about almost everything we do. Why is that? Paul says it's because a disobedient spirit, one who is constantly challenging every single law and force which God has called into being, is at work. He is assaulting us and working through us, constantly trying to get us to be disobedient to the truth that we know.

Then, for his third answer, Paul goes further, bringing this right down to the individual. We have looked at society, back of which is the malevolent cruelty and malicious design of the Devil, a being of incredible power, subtlety and intelligence, with whom none of us is able in any degree to match wits - he'll trap us every time, as he has through the history of the world. But when it comes right down to it, it comes right out of the individual level, so Paul adds 'All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.'

Paul won't let our little problem reside only with society or with the machinations of the Devil, as real as these are, but brings it right out to where you and I live. The cravings of our sinful nature - the lusts of the flesh. Now, don't immediately read that as being bad. The flesh is our human nature, the way we human beings were constructed. We live in a body of flesh and bone. But the Scriptures indicate that something has happened to that flesh, that something has gained control of it and has begun to twist it. But there are good things about the flesh - basic desires which God created, like hunger and thirst and the desire for sex, the desire for attention, the enjoyment of pleasure, the acquisition of goods. There's nothing wrong with these things.

But there is a twist to them that causes the problem. The word used for 'cravings' is really the word 'will.' It carries with it the thought of an unbreakable resolve, a determination. The nearest English equivalent today is the word 'drive.' These basic desires become drives, and when they become drives, they become wrong. That's the subtlety of this. What's wrong with eating? Why, nothing. If you don't eat, then you won't live. But where do we cross the line between a normal satisfying of our appetites and a normal enjoyment of food for pleasure - because God made us that way - and gourmand-ism and gluttony, where we live for eating, where we keep records of all the restaurants which serve the finest food, where we study them and plan feasts and we build much of our life around them, and thus we sacrifice the relationships of life which are truly important in order than we may indulge in eating? Then it becomes a drive, it masters us. That's what Paul is talking about here - the drives of the body.

What's wrong with sleeping? Nothing. What's wrong with sex? Nothing. God made it. It's a perfectly normal practice of humanity. God likes it - God designed it. But when it becomes a drive that we build our life around, that we must have, to which we sacrifice other values, then it becomes idolatrous and is one of these drives, these inordinate desires. The same can be said of hobbies meant for our pleasure -fishing, boating, gardening, collecting. Desires that become drives promise much and deliver little.

The same pattern works with our emotions. Indignation and hurt may be natural responses to the way we are treated by people. But when they become jealousy and envy and malice and bitterness and desire for revenge, they can seize us and enslave us. They can begin to run our lives so that we build our lives around them, so that everything we do is related to some terrible envy. That's a drive, a will of the mind.

This transition from desire to drive can grasp us at any point in our life. When the desire becomes a controlling passion in our lives, it turns wrong. Anything which controls us, for which we begin to sacrifice normal relationships, and which begins ultimately to enslave us, is the very sort of thing Paul is talking about here. This is precisely what produces the transgressions and sins which mark the death of humanity.

So, do you see how subtle this is, how widespread, how deeply embedded in life, how inescapable this is? Who of us can win over this? Who can distinguish when we've passed the line? None of us is capable of it. That's why the condition of humanity is hopeless.

And that's why Paul says, in verse 3, 'Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.' The wrath of God is what we might call the 'law of inevitable consequences,' the fact that what we do will have consequences. Evil results will come from our actions when our actions ignore truth. Actions which ignore God lead to consequences which will destroy our humanity, and tear down the beauty of human dignity within us. So people who ignore God and allow their desires to turn into drives, whether it be physically or emotionally or through habits or activities, those people will become dehumanized, depersonalized. That's the working out of the wrath of God.

And we are subject to that, Paul says, because of these great forces at work: the incredibly resourceful Devil, with his clever and subtle strategy to work through the world to force us to conform to patterns which destroy, and who works through the normal, God-given desires of the flesh to turn desires into drives which lead to excess and destruction. And to top it all off, we get to this not-too-good place on our own as well, 'by nature' (the text says) - that is, we are born this way. We are born into this condition and there is nothing we can do about it. Education, legislation, a change of environment, therapy, these so-called remedies might rearrange the pattern but will *never* change the basic problem. Which is why humanity struggles endlessly trying to correct itself but never succeeds.

So, if there is anything which should make us praise God, it is to understand this tremendously hopeless condition in which humanity is lost, unable to help itself, struggling, miserable, wretched, unfulfilled, unsatisfied, getting worse and worse, more corrupt, and trying in all sincerity to find answers on every side. Which we won't find.

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